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The Poor People's Campaign

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The Poor People's Campaign

PETER S. BEAGLE

1. The Southern Caravan

They really were poor, by the way. People keep asking me about that, as though the depth of their own compassion depended upon it. It seems to be very important to ascertain that the members of the Poor People's Campaign, the muddy, ungracious dwellers in Resurrection City, were "representatives"—comparatively well-off messengers from the genuine poor back home. That's the polite way of putting it.

In a sense, it's true. The lost poor, the people long drained of the energy either for hope or for fury, for anything but staying alive—no, they didn't come to Washington. My friend Mr. Collins W. Harris, who owns the land he farms, and lives comfortably by the dire standards of Crenshaw County, Alabama, never expected it to be different.

"The people who ought to be with us, the ones who need help the most, they won't move to get it. You can't make them move. I know a woman down near where I live, she was born in a cow pen, and she lives there now, and she'll die in that cow pen. You couldn't get her to think about living nowhere else but there. In my community it's no good telling people how to do—you have to show them. You got to let them see you being what you talk about. So I just had to go on up to Washington."

But the people who did come to Resurrection City were properly

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poor, by the standards of anyone who is likely to be reading this story. I do want to get that cleared up. When in doubt as to the exact degree of deprivation, teeth usually provide a convenient index. Your true poor old man most often has a collapsed mouth: hard, slick blue-gray alternating with blazing splotches of infection; empty, except for a couple of tallowy lumps. The young ones—the girls especially—tend to have curved holes in the sides of their teeth, and soft bluish spots, almost transparent. They get sick easily, too.

Remember that poor people frequently lie about their condition, not only to reporters and interested visitors, but to one another. "How much money you think I got in my pocket right now? Yeah, well, I got as much as I need, man, as much as I need." The women will talk much more openly on that subject than the men and boys. The women's wounds are elsewhere.

"We eats grits and we drinks that Kool-Aid," she said. I never knew her name; she was a big old woman from Marks, Mississippi, who lost her shoes marching in the rain. "Grits and Kool-Aid and dry beans. I got my daughter and my three grandchirren living with me, and two of them little chirren ain't never had a piece of pork or a chicken in all they lives. My daughter gets fifty-four dollars and eighty cents a month from the welfare, and there ain't a job in town would pay her that much. It just seems like nothing ever changes. For a while these few years, with Dr. King and President Kennedy and all, I was having some hopes that my grandchirren might be going to have a better life than I have had. But it just seems like nothing ever changes. When I was a little girl they wasn't no welfare, but sometimes you could kill a pig, eat pork all winter."

The Poor People's Campaign was born—partly, at least—out of those three desperate words: nothing ever changes. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. announced the Campaign in December of 1967 as an extended program of demonstrations and possible civil disobedience in Washington, D.C. He spoke of "dislocating" the city, of tying up transportation, sitting-in at government offices, boycotting the schools,

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filling the hospitals and the jails—all the established methods practiced and perfected against the Bull Connors and Jim Clarks in such stations of the cross as Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, Albany, Grenada, St. Augustine, in the days when the South was a lone, mad outlaw, and freedom meant voting and integrated restaurants. "These tactics have done it before," he said, "and that is all we have to go on."

But that was long ago, a generation. Then he had been able to compel the federal government to protect the constitutional rights of Southern blacks; now he was calling for a revolution—for a guaranteed annual income, for the abolition of slums, for free food and medical care for the poor, for the creation of millions of meaningful jobs. In that one sad, foolish, lovely word, "meaningful," lay Dr. King's real radicalism, his challenge to a conviction as old as America: that the poor have no right to enjoy themselves. They may live, but they must never be allowed to forget that they are being punished.

Dr. King's plan was to establish a grand coalition of poor people—black, white, Mexican-American, Indian, and Puerto Rican—and to bring them to Washington in April: some three thousand to begin with, and thousands more later. They would build a shantytown on public land (it was then to be called "The City of Hope"), and they would tell their story and be their story, making their need, their anger, their sickness, and their beauty visible on the six o'clock news, day after day, for as long as it might take to shame a nation at dinner into seeing them. I don't think the plans were ever much clearer than that.

He spoke often of the Poor People's Campaign as the last chance to avert civil war and the fascist dictatorship that he feared must follow. But it seemed even then that he expected the campaign to fail, in terms of achieving its objectives, and that his real hope was to expose America's suicidal selfishness to itself and the world, beyond anyone's skill to cover again, or to forget. Reject these, tear down their shacks and run them home, and America will never again be able to lie about what it is. In no other country could that be conceived of as a victory;

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but then, no other country has the particular stake in its vision of itself that America has.

On April 4, 1968, a few days before the Poor People's Campaign was to have been launched, Dr. King was murdered in Memphis.

The Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, Dr. King's closest companion and associate, succeeded him as the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and leader of the Poor People's Campaign. More beside than behind him stood a rank of brilliant individualists—Hosea Williams, James Bevel, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson—all with more familiar names and more flamboyant personalities than his own. Abernathy is a heavy man with a sad face. He may have been the best man Dr. King could have chosen as his heir, or the worst. I don't think it ever mattered.

The Poor People's Campaign was made up of eight contingents converging on Washington from different sections of the country. In early May I joined the caravan of buses coming up out of the Deep South, starting from Edwards, Mississippi, and winding through Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia—the world of preachers and mules and tarpaper made to look like bricks—Martin Luther King's world. I'd been there before, for a little while, in the summer of 1965. Much in the land had changed a great deal in only that short time, but not this world, not to my eyes. It took me a good while to feel the difference.

The Southern Caravan was overwhelmingly black, of course. I think there were eight whites out of perhaps 450 marchers. But in Fayette County, Tennessee, three summers ago, the only safety and comfort was to be surrounded by black faces, black shanties, broken black roads, to wriggle as deep down as possible into the body heat of the ancient black life. In a day or so, on this return, it was like that again, even to the slowing-down of my New York voice, my stumbling hunger to be friendly as unchanged as the landscape. And I was at once embarrassed and relieved to find it so.

Sometimes there were eight or ten air-conditioned Trailways buses;

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more often we rode in tiny, stuttering crates with the names of high schools and Baptist churches painted on their sides. The black communities of each city we stopped in paid our way on to the next, as they fed us fried chicken, took us home to spend the night, and wished us a somewhat overeager "Godspeed." SCLC's taproot is the black Southern church, and the church can still command in Greenville, South Carolina, and get hundreds of box lunches fixed, and find money where there is no money. This is not the case in Chicago.

The oldest man I met was seventy-six, according to the middle-aged friend who was always with him. Toothless head as naked as a kneecap or an elbow; the flesh used up, fallen away around the high tendons—nothing left to him but bones, black skin, and a terrible sweet smile. I never heard him speak. The other man helped him to dress and undress, washed him, shaved him, talked quietly to him in the chaos of the church dinners and the rallies on the basketball courts. "I take pains with him," he said. "Because I know God will bless me if I take pains with him." He was a tall, slow man himself, still strong, but starting to bend, starting to wear down. The two of them were next-door neighbors in Birmingham. "I got to carry him back home directly after we get there, cause he can't be sleeping out in no shack, his age. But he just wanted to go so bad. He's been real sick, too, with his stomach."

There were others nearly as old: women like huge, soft towers of starch; men as gristly as snapping turtles, their ages not measurable in years but in degree of defeat. But the majority of the Southern marchers were very young, ranging from junior high school age into the early twenties. Riding the buses with them felt like going off to summer camp. The young men drank peach wine openly, though it was forbidden, and stayed up all night fooling around with the girls, and always had one more knife that they didn't turn over to the campaign marshals. In Fayette County they were like this—foolish, big-talking, blooming into unimaginable bravery.

Three years before they were much more isolated, much less

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aware of other blackness, other poverty, other worlds. Now they know all about Watts and Hough and Rochester; about Chicanos boycotting the Los Angeles high schools and Dick Gregory going to jail with the Indians in Washington State—even about Harry Edwards's proposal that blacks refuse to compete in the Olympic Games. They knew about SNCC and Stokely Carmichael even then in the southwest corner of Tennessee; but now, away down in Marks, Mississippi, they know who the Black Panthers are and the Brown Berets. They aren't afraid of white people anymore, and they know that they frighten whites, and for a while this discovery will make all others secondary.

Sitting on a tree stump somewhere in South Carolina, waiting out the third bus breakdown that day, Wilson Talbert, a lean, neat nineteen-year-old from Selma, showed me a snapshot of his family and told me, "When I graduated high school last year, I found there was just three kinds of jobs I could get. Porter, garbage-man, waiter. That was it. That's all they got for black boys, stay in school or don't stay in school. They just gone draft you in the army, anyway, whatever you do. Ain't much to wait around for, is it? It used to be I didn't know to want anything better, but now I do. If I find a good job in D.C., I'm staying on up there—if not, I don't know. I'm not looking to get in no trouble, but you get to thinking about it, you don't know where to stop."

The young girls on the buses were in school or unemployed; most of the older women were on welfare. Grace Pitts, who got on the bus at Charlotte, North Carolina, was twenty-three years old, but she looked older, except when she smiled. She had a beautiful face, finely made and balanced, like a kite or a guitar. Grace was unmarried, but she had three children by two men. She lived on welfare, and such money as the oldest child's father gave her from time to time.

"I don't like being on the welfare. But we eat just the same food as when I'm working, so I think it's better for me to be home with my children. I know I'm not poor like some of these people—" (Collins Harris had chided her mildly for telling a reporter the amount of her allotment, which is three times what she'd get in Mississippi or Ala-

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bama) "but I'm poor. We aren't starving, but we don't ever get ahead, not one step. I'm going to Washington because I can't stand to think that it's never going to be any different. I know some of these women lived worse all their lives, but I couldn't stand it."

For all the new awareness, many of the marchers had never been more than fifty miles from home in their lives, and they grew homesick and fearful as the buses wound north. I remember big, intense Jesse Williams, who stood up in the front of our bus as we neared Virginia to warn all the girls, "Look, sisters, from now on you got to be watchin' yourselves all the time with these city boys, or you likely to wind up floatin' face down in the river somewhere. I mean, we just play like we bad, but up here they ain't playin'. You got to watch yourselves."

Henry Lee Williams, his younger brother, had spent almost every day of his sixteen years in Marion, Alabama. Small, dark, square-faced, his eyes as shy as Jesse's are fierce, he talked most of the time about a café where he loved to eat. He's known the woman who runs the place all his life, and she cooks the best chicken in the world. "You ever go down to Marion, you tell her you a friend of mine, and she probably charge you a little less. She don't cook just for the money, she's a real nice lady. I wish I was there right now, me and my friend Arthur."

I think it was in Charlotte that the rumor spread that everyone was going to have to make up five good reasons (some said ten) for going to Washington, in order to answer the reporters properly "when they come on the buses lookin' for a fool." If there was such an edict, it was never followed through; but the story was believed, because SCLC was always doing things like that, or announcing them anyway. Rumors and official information proved accurate about the same percentage of the time.

At sixteen Henry Lee was already a veteran of the dogs and the jails, of being beaten up because it's fun. ("Every time that club miss my head, I hear it come down on the sidewalk—whock! whock!") He knew why he was going to Washington, but it panicked him to have to

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put it into words. This is what he came up with, finally, talking about his reason for dropping out of school.

"The books was all tore up. You be working on a problem, turn a page, and the next page might be gone, just tore right out. I couldn't work with no messed-up books like that. You know, a black student, he probably worry more than a white student about somethin' like that, about not finishin' a problem, spellin' a word wrong. They take it very serious. You want to get it right, and sometimes you get mad."

The caravan's nurse, Nanny Washburn of Atlanta, rode on our bus. Reporters in every town always picked up on her, because she was white, and because her blind son was traveling with her. They used to describe her: faded and arthritic, eating her sunflower seeds and going on in a voice like a gnat, "America is a sick nation, so sick, and when the revolution comes we gonna have to put all them Congressmen in the mental asylum." No story ever mentioned that she had beautiful hazel eyes, luminous and perfectly clear: mermaid's eyes.

Nanny is a witness, Nanny is the Ancient Mariner. She was a labor organizer in Georgia in the twenties and thirties, when that was synonymous with being a Communist and a nigger-lover, in the endless Southern night, when nobody cared. There was no civil rights movement then; there were no sit-ins, no boycotts, no movie stars buying full-page ads in the Sunday *New York Times,* no college students coming south for the summer, no federal troops in the schools, no voting acts in Congress, no cases before the Supreme Court. The Ku Klux Klan flogged, castrated, and murdered, and nothing was done, nothing was expected to be done. Nanny was there when nobody cared, and now she has no conversation: only a story.

She was frighteningly humble, this Southern white woman who had been hit on the head with gun butts. "I want you all to tell me when I say something wrong or offend anybody," she was forever reminding us all. "I'm no intellectual, you know. I can talk to the people, cause I'm one of them, but you be sure and correct me when I say something stupid. I want you to correct me, cause I got so much to

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learn." Nanny Washburn, sixty-eight years old, with a dead husband, a blind son, and a blind daughter who died.

My best friend throughout the Campaign was Collins Harris, who came from "somewhere near Grady, Alabama." He turned fifty-eight in Resurrection City; he'd be almost ninety years old now, if he's alive. You might very easily have seen him in newspaper photographs in 1968 or on television: cameramen always zeroed in on him. Collins was the man wearing an old straw hat the color of bottom-leaf tobacco, with a frayed purple band around the crown that said FREEDOM in gold letters. He had a white mustache, and a calm, solid way of standing still and looking around him. His dark brown skin was almost entirely unlined: only his curiously mischievous eyes were old. There were little skims of yellow in the white, and the outlines of the irises were beginning to blur. You would have remembered him.

We met on the bus, on the second day out of Macon, when I sat down next to him and he offered me a slightly questionable apple. I turned it down. Collins twitched a sardonic eyebrow and asked, "No? Why's that?"

"I'd really like the orange," I said. Collins smiled.

We traveled together from then on, sharing food, clothing when my knapsack got lost, and occasionally a bed—traditional American relationship between the white boy and the older black man. It is long gone now, with the world that produced it, and I wonder where the white boys will go to study competence and grace in the world.

Collins is a farmer, but he has made a living as a welder, a carpenter, and an auto mechanic. He has been married twice; he has children and grandchildren and children again, the last two adopted a few years ago. He shaves with a floppy straight razor. He believes in God, but not very much in ministers. There was a minister in Durham, North Carolina, who voiced some fear that the Klan might retaliate for his opening his church to the Poor People's Campaign. Collins was disgusted. "What's the use of a preacher who ain't got no more faith in God than that? That man got no business preaching to me."

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He was with Martin Luther King from the beginning, the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955. Collins never talked much about Dr. King, just as he never sang or clapped during the marches, or applauded the speakers at the evening rallies. "I can't be bothered with singing lies," he said once. "I don't sing or pray less I mean it." But one evening in Norfolk, as part of the entertainment, a local boy got up and recited the "I Have a Dream" speech in a ghastly perfect imitation of Dr. King's voice. I was chilled, horrified—I didn't realize what I was hearing, as I came to understand after several more recitations in more churches by children so proud to have Dr. King alive within them. But when I turned to say something to Collins, he was crying, without making a sound.

As long as the caravan was moving, it was all right. There were fights and hysterics, and every possible kind of logistical foulup (buses and people got lost with the same ease as luggage); but even so, the spirit of the caravan was alive and hopeful. The best moment came when we marched five miles through Greenville and it rained so hard we couldn't breathe. The water was over our ankles, and we put our arms around the nearest shoulders and went on, laughing, gasping, pulling off our shirts, singing a dozen songs at once, totally disorganized but overcoming. The young man who led the march was a cripple on crutches, but he walked all the way, with two friends wiping the rain out of his eyes. They tried to make him get into a car, but he fought and cursed them so hard that they let him walk.

"We shouldn't have stopped for dinner," Collins said later that night. "We could have walked all the way to Washington." Then he laughed and nudged me, but I already understood that Collins is never just joking.

We never really got to Washington, not together. The Southern Caravan ended in Fairfax County, Virginia, nine miles from Washington. Resurrection City had been under construction on the Mall, by the Reflecting Pool, only since May 13—less than a week—and there was a shortage of food and housing for new arrivals. Our group was

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broken up and scattered through several private schools and Unitarian churches. We remained in those "holding centers" for three days.

It was a bad time. The momentum of the march was completely dissipated; there was nothing to do but sleep, eat, and watch television. Litter piled up in the antiseptic dayrooms where we spent almost all of our time; drugs made their first appearance, and fights were popping everywhere. People started being sent home in batches—worse, they began to leave on their own, out of boredom and homesickness. Robert Hanson, the crippled march leader, was robbed of all his money and wept helplessly in the bathroom. "You try to be nice," he kept saying.

The SCLC staff who came out every day to hold the nonviolence workshops that were originally supposed to precede the campaign were as appalled by us as any white social workers might have been. From saying that we were the only people who could save the soul of America, they began to imply that we were being held in Fairfax County not because Resurrection City wasn't ready for us but because we weren't ready for Resurrection City. The character of SCLC—and the story of the Poor People's Campaign—is contained in that inversion.

They were afraid of our failing them, rather than the other way around. I think of the young SCLC girl—bright, pretty, certainly hip—who asked each of us in turn to give his or her definition of nonviolence and refused to comment on the answers, or to reply to any questions herself except with another question. Everybody got mad, and so did she finally. She snapped, "Look, I didn't come here to answer questions. I'm the one who's supposed to be asking them."

On the morning of May 22, ready or not, we were driven in private cars to Arlington Bridge. From there we walked to Arlington National Cemetery to visit John F. Kennedy's grave. We sang "We Shall Overcome" very quietly, and stood silent for a little while, and then we walked back down to the bridge and over it into Resurrection City.

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"Well, I'm home," Collins said. He was as calm and slow and easy as ever, but when he took my hand, his own hand was trembling.

2. Resurrection City

The rain wasn't what ruined it. The weather was dreadful, of course: not only during those three-day spells when the whole camp turned to a shimmering red-clay gumbo, but also in the brief intervals of dank heat that dried the ruts between the wooden shacks ankle-deep and sucked a sick, stinking fetor up out of the mud. Garbage wasn't collected; the truck that serviced the chemical toilets couldn't operate in the wet. It was cold, and there was nowhere to go to be warm. People stayed in bed all day, or sat by smoky trash fires. Mosquitoes actually started to breed in the flooded areas where the children liked to float around on big pieces of scrap wood.

The day we arrived on the Washington Mall, we were issued bedding and enough plywood and hardware—but no instructions—to start constructing simple A-frame shelters. Collins, as befitted an experienced carpenter, took twice as long to choose our materials as anyone else in the shivering, bewildered crowd and then set about building us a house. I can't call it a shack. It had a foundation, a level floor, a real door that stayed shut, and even a couple of basic bedframes for our splotchy gray mattresses. There was no insulation, of course, but there were no drafts either, and no leaks, which made it quite possibly unique in all those rows of hutches and coops and leantos bounded by Constitution Avenue and Independence Avenue, the Washington Monument–Lincoln Memorial, where Collins and I washed up most mornings. By neighborhood standards, we were living in a mansion.

Perhaps Dr. King's greatest disappointment in Resurrection City would have been that it was so disproportionately black. The Appalachian whites (who included Myles Horton, founder of the famous Highlander Folk School) were isolated in one swampy corner of the

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camp; the few hippies had their own quarter. The various black contingents quickly settled into semi-independent city-states called "Boston," "New York," "Watts," "Atlanta," "Baltimore," "Philadelphia," and so on, each choosing representatives to meet with the other delegations at the proposed City Council. You could always tell where you were, walking the duckboard streets of Resurrection City, depending on the graffiti adorning the sloping roofs: New York and Philadelphia ran to BLACK POWER, Atlanta was SOUL POWER, while Watts rather surprisingly favored quotations from Gandhi and Dr. King. Many of the Baltimore shacks were emblazoned with detailed scenes of Africa, Egypt, and children playing happily in some green anywhere. And the rain fell endlessly, endlessly on it all.

But the rain wouldn't have mattered if the campaign had been moving. Boredom and confusion—not paid agitators from SNCC, as we kept being told—were the saboteurs of Resurrection City; but at the first flicker of direction, the slightest hint of real confrontation, the marchers surged together and functioned perfectly well. They picketed the Department of Agriculture in the rain, day and night; they spoke their minds to everybody from jumpy cops with two-foot billies to Attorney General Ramsey Clark; they went to jail for singing and praying in the streets on Capitol Hill. The SCLC leaders were annoyed about that, because it hadn't been planned in advance. Spontaneity made them as nervous as it did the Washington police.

It was all like a badly rehearsed ballet: a *pas de deux* between two strangers with no sense of each other's rhythms, ambition, and limitations. In such a dance, there are moments of frantic improvisation, but what is happening is still a ballet, with rules, and an ending, and few echoes beyond that ending. Anyone who expected something different shouldn't have gone to a ballet.

Could it have been any different?—if Dr. King had lived, perhaps? Surely not in terms of what was achieved. I'm amazed that they squeezed as much as they did out of Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman: more money for the federal food-stamp program; six new

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commodities added to that dole; emergency food distribution in about 250 poverty-stricken counties, and the standard programs established in 331 more. For this was Richard Nixon's sullen hour, and the congressmen's mail was running two and three to one against the Poor People's Campaign. It couldn't have ended any differently, but it didn't have to be the staged, dishonest mess that it was. Even with all that rain.

SCLC never truly decided just what Resurrection City was supposed to be. In the earliest rhetoric, it was going to be an instant slum, a deliberate embarrassment beside the beautiful Reflecting Pool. "We're going to bring all our troubles to Washington—all our rats and our roaches, our sick folks, our hungry babies. We're going to show those people up there just how we have to live, in the richest country in the world." By the time we got there, it had been reconceived as a City of God, "where you don't pay no taxes, and you don't go to jail," a magical exemplar of the humane society. At the end, it was an island. Nobody beyond the frail boundary fence—and not everyone behind it—cared about Resurrection City.

Most of what the newspapers said was true; if they lied about some things, they missed a few others. There were guns in Resurrection City—I heard shots twice at night—and there were knives and a hell of a lot of liquor. Pot was easy to come by, and I knew at least one woman who was on heroin. There were rapes, shakedowns, attacks on tourists and reporters. Robbery was so common and unpunishable that most people quit bothering to report it. Of the SCLC marshals who patrolled the camp, half were thieves and bullies themselves, while the rest ran themselves almost insane without reward or encouragement. Dr. Abernathy and Hosea Williams kept on talking about those paid agitators.

Yet I never felt in danger in Resurrection City; and if I didn't love it, there were people who did. I remember a fierce man named Ray Robinson saying, "The moment I step outside this city, even just to walk over to the Reflecting Pool, I am dehumanized, man. Dehuman-

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ized. And I don't get human again until I'm back in Resurrection City with my friends. I have to make myself go outside, when I go."

Mrs. Mary Frances Thornton, a tiny, demure lady like one of those foot-high African antelopes, stayed on week after week with her ten-year-old son, though she hadn't meant to remain so long. "I like it here," she said. "There's nothing happening here that's any worse than Selma. I live in one room there, too, and it smells worse than anything in Resurrection City. Now here I've made some real good friends, and the SCLC—" which she pronounced "Elsie-Elsie," like most people— "they feeding us much better than we ever ate in Selma, and nobody messes with me and Ernie. They talk about closing down Resurrection City, because of it being a health hazard and all, but nobody ever says they should close Selma down. That's what they should do, close Selma."

Yet the Southern Caravan—the contingent Mrs. Thornton and I traveled with—was the only one deliberately broken up and scattered throughout the campground. I have no idea why this was done. Many of the Mississippi and Alabama people were ill at ease among Northern blacks and began leaving, a few at a time. Young Henry Lee Williams was gone in a week, and Wilson Talbert left soon after. I don't think the two men from Birmingham—the old man and his friend—ever made it to Washington.

But a surprising number of men and women from the Deep South hung on through the cold rain, the aimlessness, and the trouble, walking 'round and 'round the Department of Agriculture; standing up in committee rooms to address polite, worried white men as distant as Martians; taking their food back to their shacks to eat in the quiet; sitting out in the sunlight on folding chairs, fussing leisurely for hours about some text in Matthew. They were home.

Grace Pitts and her children stayed to the end, and Nanny Washburn walked with her blind Joe wherever people were walking that day, passing out vitamins and saying, "It's wonderful, it's just wonderful. I'm just so glad I lived to see it." A half-crazy girl from

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Charlotte, whose fits of crying and fighting on the bus made her an immediate scapegoat for the other women, became something of a saint in Resurrection City when she stood up at a rally to announce that the welfare people wanted to take and put that loop inside her, so that she couldn't have any more children. "I got something wrong in me there," she said. "It's hurting me all the time, but I am not going to no hospital and let them doctors touch me and put that loop in me." Women started to cry, listening to her.

Collins Harris just went on being Collins Harris: unhurried, undeceived, yet everlastingly hopeful. Many things about Resurrection City distressed him, especially the ways of the Northern city kids; but when I think of him, I see him ambling after a marshal who was dragging a boy in a gang jacket toward the plywood "City Hall," meaning to get him sent home. The point isn't that the boy hadn't done what the marshal said he had, and that Collins made the marshal turn him loose, but that Collins cared enough to move. He never seemed to think much about whether he should move or not.

Whatever he thought about SCLC's direction of the campaign, Collins remained completely loyal to Ralph Abernathy. Guerrilla talk bored him; boycotts, sit-ins, cooperatives, and political pressure were his reality. "These kids running round hollering black power, black power, talking bad about everybody, calling Mrs. King 'Ol' Hattie,' I want to know where's they program? You got no damn program, don't you come bothering 'round me. I don't mind going to jail, I wouldn't care about getting killed, but not for no fools."

I used to watch him at meetings of the pointless, powerless City Council, listening silently to furious monologues about how Detroit and Philadelphia got issued everything first, while New York, located a long way from the dining tent and out of earshot of the rickety public-address system, was having to buy and cook its own food, and we want our cooking gear back. The hippies would suggest that we live like our Indian brothers, in tribes, entrusting our decisions to those elders who were mystically connected to the old tribal wisdom. "I think we're

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getting too strung out behind this whole organization thing. Like that's the white man's bag, this categorizing thing." Council meetings went on like that for hours.

At last Collins would get up and talk one more time about the need for us to be like bits of sand and stone, mixing together into the common mortar of a new society. "If you can't be a rock, be a pebble, be a little chunk of gravel. It all makes mortar. I'm trying to be some cement, myself." I remember when he first came up with that image, studying an old brick wall. He loved good workmanship.

But there was no mortar in the Poor People's Campaign. Except for the Appalachian whites, none of the other delegations ever lived in Resurrection City. The Indians stayed in St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, the Mexican-Americans in the private Hawthorne School. Until very near the end of the campaign, we were told almost daily that "our brown brothers" were about to move in. We demonstrated with them a few times—at the Supreme Court and at the Department of Justice—but they weren't fooled.

"We have to read the damn papers to find out what you people are doing," a Mexican-American acquaintance told me. "And when we get something going by ourselves, you just walk right in and take it over, go home when you feel like it. We're having a rally or something, your guys come on and push our guys off the stage. Hell, we can't work with you, how we gonna live with you? You got no respect for us, no more than the Anglos, you think we can't tell?"

Originally a triumvirate of equals—black, Indian, and Mexican-American—was to make decisions for the campaign, but the closest that plan ever came to realization was an occasional hurried conference between Ralph Abernathy and Reies Lopez Tijerina, when the New Mexico Chicano leader had been complaining too loudly about SCLC's domination. But SCLC never could share power much. I remember what a friend of mine who worked for SNCC in Mississippi said about them three years ago.

"They move into an area where we've been organizing, and it's

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like the circus coming to town. They won't work with the local people like we do—it's just a couple of rallies, a couple of speeches, couple of marches, a few heads busted, lots of headlines, and they're gone again, and we have to start all over. Nothing we can do about it, either. They got Martin the Ace going for them."

They don't have Martin now. One woman in Resurrection City said of Ralph Abernathy, "Dr. King could talk for twenty minutes, and I wouldn't understand one single word he said, but it didn't matter. Dr. Abernathy, he talks for two hours, and I understand every word. But I guess I don't care."

His situation was tragic, but he kept finding his way into absurd, pitiable messes, caused mostly by a reluctance to trust his followers with the truth. The resentment engendered by his staff (and most of SCLC's people) living downtown at the Pitts Motor Hotel might have been much less intense if Abernathy had simply explained that he couldn't possibly run the campaign from Resurrection City. But he let himself be acclaimed mayor, and he had volunteers—Collins was one—working every day on a big plywood house, which he never lived in. The low point came on the evening when he was called to the camp after there had been a couple of really bad fights. He promised sadly that if everybody got themselves together and behaved, he'd see to it that they got more fried chicken for dinner. Abernathy never made a speech in Resurrection City without promising chicken or filet mignon.

The speeches poured down on us as unceasingly as the rain. The SCLC had been born of the black Southern church and drew its strength from that soil, and the Poor People's Campaign ran on the rhythms and language of the church: on images, on metaphors, on slogans banged out over and over. Jesse Jackson's shouts of "Soul power!" and his morning ritual: "I may be poor, but I am—somebody! I may be hungry, but I am—somebody! I may not have an education, but I am—somebody!" James Bevel's signature vision of white society as a dangerously sick, mad patient, and the poor as doctors and psy-

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chiatrists. Ralph Abernathy promising to smite the Pharaohs of this nation with plague upon plague, until at last they let our people go. And, always, the image of Martin Luther King as the murdered dreamer whose dream cannot be killed; as Joseph among his envious brothers.

> And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, "Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Hosea Williams, SCLC's direct-action leader, had the most striking image in his repertoire: the black dawn cities, with thousands of people hurrying way across town to haul the white man's garbage before he gets up, to start cleaning his house and fixing his meals; of mothers leaving their children to raise the white man's children. Hosea is the one who was always warning, "Tomorrow we are going to jail, brothers and sisters, tomorrow we are going to give the cops a chance to use those billy clubs. The picnic is over."

But it was never anything more than a ballet, a trivialization of real hunger, and real injustice, and real, sleepless pain. Once in a while things flashed out of control for a moment, like the time a delegation from the entire Poor People's Campaign met with Ramsey Clark, having spent the previous day demonstrating outside the Department of Justice, demanding to see him. The grievance at issue was a Mexican-American concern, but the Resurrection City blacks took over, standing up one by one to sock it to Ramsey Clark just because he was there and white, and their lives are hopeless, and his department is unfortunately named.

Lila Mae Brooks of Sunflower County, Mississippi—where Senator James O. Eastland was drawing $13,000 a month for not growing

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anything on his land—shouted at Clark, "If we don't get no justice, man, you better be gone from here. You done sat down for too long. You done got fat back there. You letting the world know that you ain't a man."

Hosea himself was very quiet, murmuring only, "We ask justice to help us redeem the soul of America." But back in Resurrection City he chewed out Lila Mae Brooks and the other delegates furiously. Over and over he kept saying, "You got to ask the man for what he can deliver. I was ashamed of you today, shakin' your finger at him."

But the day before, Hosea had been out there for seven hours, calling Ramsey Clark a criminal and a Pharaoh and a white god, and threatening to tear his playhouse down. People like Lila Mae Brooks don't understand about ballet, about symbols, about the uses of rhetoric. They thought it was all for real.

In the evenings I sat with shadows around the trash fires that gave Resurrection City the look of a Civil War encampment; or I drank sweet wine between cold plywood walls, with the rain thudding on the plastic skylight. Somewhere around the Baltimore shacks, the kids would be beating on garbage cans, on bottles and metal pipes, drumming out the same rainy riff for five or ten minutes at a time, and then breaking flawlessly to a new phrase. There would be a candle blowing, and someone asleep in a corner.

"It's bullshit, brother, you know that. They ain't done nothin' right since we got here, and it wouldn't make no damn difference anyway. Johnson ain't gone give us nothin' that matters. No way."

"You hear they tryin' to kill Abernathy?"

"Yeah, that would do it, man. I ain't sayin' I dig Abernathy so much, but that would have to be it. Black power all the way then."

"I called my mama last night, and they ain't had one welfare check come in since I left there. Somebody said they was gone do that to anybody went to Washington, but I didn't believe it."

"Your mama! Willie Evans from Dearborn, his mama called home and she found out somebody had done ripped the roof right off

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her house. Just skin it right off, man, like you skin a banana. Just skin the whole roof off."

"Goddamn, they want it to happen! They want it to be the fire, and people gettin' shot up and killed. And they gone get it like that, too—I don't see no way 'round it. I know it's comin'."

A friend of mine called them the moribunds: the young men and women who were so sure that they were going to be killed very soon. I remember how many of them wondered aloud often whether they would actually be able to shoot at their white friends when the time came.

Cleveland Red, who might be seventeen or twenty-five, told me one evening that it was the Mafia behind all the trouble between black and white, behind all the trouble in the world. "We got to stop them, man, you and me. You telling me we gone let five thousand of them turn three billion of us around?" He never pretended to be nonviolent. "Shit, I been violent all my life, only I never called it that. You don't think about it, you just like a damn fish in the water. And they tryin' to tell me about that Gandhi."

There was a lovely black woman from Newark who used to bounce up in front of me on the skiddy duckboards, demanding, "How are you today, my brother? How are you really holding out?" Her name was Dolores, and she had high cheeks and long, clean fingers. She was an astrology nut and called everyone by his or her zodiac name. Once she said to me, "Your race is finished, your time is over everywhere. I'm talking astrologically now, not politically. Even if you started to do right, it still wouldn't make any difference to the stars. Your cycle is over, that's all. Exhausted."

I liked her very much. I said, "Please don't call me 'you' like that."

"I know, I'm sorry," she said. "But I have to do that, or else it just gets impossible."

On the night of June 4, Collins and I were roused in our shack by the rusty splutter of the public-address system coming to life. We came awake swearing, "—Two in the damn morning, and they still play-toy-

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ing around with that damn thing—" and then the words began to sink in. "Senator Robert F. Kennedy has been shot in Los Angeles."

Robert Kennedy's murder marks a dividing line in the history of the Poor People's Campaign. In that week, Resurrection City's population—three thousand when we arrived on May 22—fell to about five hundred; in that numb and silent week, with a moratorium on all demonstrations, the last of the campaign's energy trickled away. When the demonstrations resumed, they had contracted to a twenty-four-hour vigil at the Department of Agriculture, protesting Orville Freeman's refusal to recommend that food stamps be issued free of charge. It was at that time also that Ralph Abernathy was apparently forced by the SCLC staff to withdraw his support of Bayard Rustin—vulnerable as both as a leftist and as a gay man—as the organizer of the June 19 "Solidarity Day" demonstration. The date, celebrated as "Juneteenth" among black people in Texas, was chosen because it wasn't until that day—in 1865, more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation—that slaves in Texas finally learned that they were free.

The Broadway and Hollywood visitors still came to Resurrection City, and that church money and assistance that only Martin Luther King's people could have mobilized kept coming until the end. Living conditions did improve somewhat: SCLC managed to get electric lights, sewer lines, and a couple of drinking fountains installed, and a well-equipped day-care center constructed. But the sense of having been abandoned by the campaign leaders grew just as steadily. There were at least three invasions of the Pitts Motor Hotel by different groups from Resurrection City, demanding angrily that Abernathy and his staff move out. They did at last, just before Solidarity Day, but by then it meant less than nothing.

The organizers, the brilliant, charismatic heirs of Dr. King—Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Hosea Williams, James Bevel—all withdrew, little by little, not so much in the body—after all, they worked terribly hard, and stayed up all night holding conferences, and at the

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last Ralph Abernathy went to jail for twenty days—but in spirit. The withdrawal of the spirit has nothing to do with the activities of the body; in fact, there is often an inverse relationship. And the further away SCLC drew from embarrassing, hopeless Resurrection City, the more desperately they put on the messy people who stayed there. The saddest lie was the one about the "waves of marchers" all across the country, ready to move into Resurrection City if and when it was emptied by mass arrests. There was another about alternate camps being established in Virginia and Maryland.

There isn't much to say about Solidarity Day. Very few people knew who Bayard Rustin was, nor Sterling Tucker (his replacement, recruited hurriedly from the Washington Urban League), but many—the young especially—sensed that the difference didn't matter at all to the Poor People's Campaign. Dolores the astrologer said it early. "They'll make a jillion speeches, and sing 'We Shall Overcome,' and pledge to go home and work in their own communities. And then they'll climb right back on those buses. No, it's over, brother, all that sociable stuff. It's over."

Some 50,000 people showed up on June 19, representatives of all the old alliances: the labor unions and the college students, the intellectuals, the clergy, the concerned middle class; Peter, Paul and Mary, Eartha Kitt. Hubert Humphrey made an appearance, and was booed. Eugene McCarthy was cheered. There were a jillion speeches, many of them quite good. But it was a very hot day, and there were few places where people could sit down and still hear the speakers on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. By the time Ralph Abernathy spoke, it was nearly six o'clock—time for the buses to leave—and the crowd had frayed to 10,000 at most.

The night before, I had sat for a long time with four middle-aged black men on the raised porch that one of them had built in front of his shack, listening to a record of Martin Luther King's speeches. Nobody said anything, but as each side ended they turned the record over to play the other again. I thought of that, listening to Abernathy.

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"I intend to stay here until justice rolls out of the halls of Congress, and righteousness falls from the Administration, and the rough places of the Government agencies are made plain, and the crooked deals of the military-industrial complex become straightforward." Dr. King was lucky to die when he did. It could have been him up there, telling lies with his heart breaking, instead of on that long-playing record in the night.

I left Resurrection City the next day. The camp's federal permit was due to expire on June 23, but I never thought the police would come in. I didn't understand ballet as well as I thought. Dolores's stars predicted it all, doubtless: not only Ralph Abernathy's big solo—the last march to the Capitol to be arrested—and the equally important ensemble of the thousand policemen stomping down the snow fence and flattening the shacks; but the kids throwing rocks at the cars cruising around their island, and the cops blanketing the place with tear gas at three in the morning. That wasn't part of the dance; but then classical ballet, classical theater, isn't much in vogue today. They have this thing now where the audience gets up on the stage.

The last time I saw Collins Harris, he was adding a whole new section to the shack we had lived in for four weeks, to make room for more people. He had already made a table and a clothes closet, and he talked about putting in a little stove. When we said good-bye, he said, "Well, Pete, I enjoyed just about every moment we spent together, and the few I didn't, they wasn't your fault." I heard later that he got ten days in jail.

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